

Australia: Former Labor PM Keating denounces Rudd government's "isolationist" stance on China

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Former Labor prime minister Paul Keating has criticised the Rudd government's recently released defence policy "White Paper" for implying that Australia could find itself at war with China at some point in the future. In his speech on July 2, Keating warned against a return to "thinking of our security in isolationist and defensive terms" and demanded a policy of "inclusiveness" and "cooperative regionalism" towards Beijing and other rising Asian powers.

Keating's remarks reflect increasingly sharp tactical divisions within the ruling elite over how to respond to China's rise as a major power and the decline of the US. Australian imperialism is caught on the horns of a strategic dilemma. China has rapidly developed into Australia's most important trading partner and source of major new investment, while the US military and political alliance is the long-standing bedrock of Canberra's international strategic calculations. Underlying the debate on the future direction of the country's foreign policy is the question as to where Australia would line up in the event of a serious confrontation between the US and China.

Keating's address was delivered at Western Australia's Curtin University on the 64th anniversary of the death of John Curtin, Labor prime minister between 1941 and 1945. The Curtin government engineered a major strategic shift, away from dependence on the British Empire and towards the now six-decade old alliance with Washington. Keating nevertheless invoked the wartime prime minister's legacy to insist that "our long term security could only be found in Asia" rather than "the quest for yet another strategic guarantor".

Keating declared that he was "at odds" with sections of the 2009 defence White Paper released in May by the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

The document, he explained, "describes as 'the remote but plausible potential of confrontation' between us and 'a major power adversary', not suggesting who that power might be.

Obviously it will not be the United States. You are then left to take your pick of China, Japan, India or Indonesia.... Taken as a whole, the Paper struck an ambivalent tone about our likely new strategic circumstances and what we should do about them. Including, for instance, failing to give us an indication as to whether it foresaw the growth of China's military capabilities as a natural and legitimate thing for a rising economic power or whether, to the contrary, it was something we should regard as a threat and for which we should plan."

Keating concluded that Australian policy makers ought to operate more independently of the US ("we should never look to position ourselves as a comfortable accessory tucked under someone else's armpit") while encouraging Beijing to "play an active role in world affairs" within strengthened multilateral political and economic institutions.

Much of Keating's analysis was self serving, in line with his egotistical self-identification as a major world statesman while in office between 1991 and 1996. Typical was the overblown description of his role in initiating the APEC leaders' meeting: "Having some sense of opportunity arising from the fact that the great powers had been taken aback and stunned [by the end of the Cold War], I moved as quickly as I could to propose a new piece of political architecture in the Asia Pacific ..."

The speech nevertheless articulated wider concerns within sections of the political establishment.

Keating stressed that "the pendulum of world economic activity has shifted and settled upon East Asia" and that "China's advent will cause adjustments". The former prime minister also spoke about the strategic implications of the global economic crisis. He noted that Australia, like the US and other advanced capitalist countries, "will have to save more and consume less"—in other words, impose a substantial reduction in the living standards of the working class. The crisis, he continued, "will change the way our own country functions as it must change the way we look at the world around us."

Keating said that China may “eclipse American power in our region”, and the question was how this process would unfold. “Will it be gradual, will the United States graciously cede the space?” he asked. Indicating that he was looking forward to precisely such a scenario, the former prime minister did not raise any of the possible consequences that would follow the alternative, and far more plausible, scenario: that Washington refuses to defer to rival powers.

This omission is all the more extraordinary given Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s blunt response to the Rudd government’s White Paper. On May 19, responding to a journalist’s question about the document, she declared: “We are a trans-Pacific power as well as a trans-Atlantic power.... We want Australia as well as other nations to know that the United States is not ceding the Pacific to anyone.”

The preparation of the White Paper involved behind the scenes wrangling over how to assess China’s growing military might and strategic influence. According to the *Australian*, Mike Pezzullo, Rudd’s senior bureaucrat in the defence department in charge of overseeing the document, rejected advice from two intelligence bodies, the Defence Intelligence Organisation and Office of National Assessments, that China was unlikely to pose a threat to Australian interests in the next 20 years. Instead Pezzullo and Air Chief Marshall Angus Houston reportedly insisted that emphasis be placed on the possibility that Beijing could challenge Australian interests.

In the end, the White Paper attempted to fudge most of the critical issues. While emphasising the importance of the US alliance it did not explicitly identify China as a strategic competitor. The *World Socialist Web Site* noted that much of the document was “cast in language that is cautious and, at times, confused. It refers only to ‘possibilities’, ‘risks’ and scenarios that ‘cannot be ruled out’” (“Australian government announces military buildup as strategic dilemma intensifies”).

The White Paper’s ambiguity has been criticised by several foreign policy commentators.

On June 24 a National Press Club discussion, featuring Professors Hugh White and Paul Dibb, made clear that neither the faction favouring closer ties with Beijing nor that which insists upon the paramount importance of the US alliance is entirely satisfied with the Rudd government’s stance.

White—who served in the 1980s as a senior adviser on the staffs of Defence Minister Kim Beazley and Prime Minister Bob Hawke, and later as a senior official in the Department Of Defence, including as deputy secretary for strategy and intelligence from 1995 to 2000—is among the most prominent

figures demanding a closer orientation to Beijing. He accused the Rudd government’s White Paper of deferring the “hard decisions” of how to respond to China’s rise, and said the document “does not carefully consider how the eclipse of US primacy should reshape our strategic objectives, nor does it systematically examine the operational options we might need to achieve them.”

White stressed the importance of US capitalism’s decline: “As the British discovered and as the Chinese discovered, once you lose economic primacy, strategic primacy follows pretty quickly.” He also demanded that preparation be made for escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing. “Do we stay with the US as it becomes drawn deeper into a competitive relationship with China?” he asked the National Press Club. “I think the answer is quite probably not.”

Paul Dibb—former director of the Joint Intelligence Organisation (1986-88) and deputy secretary of defence (1988-91)—criticised the White Paper on other grounds. After noting that the document appeared to be a work-in-progress report rather than an unambiguous policy statement, he challenged predictions that China would overtake the US in the Pacific in the next two or three decades. He also criticised the Rudd government for raising the possibility of going to war against a nuclear-armed power independently of the US. “Do we actually think that if China attacked us and we decisively defeated them, that Beijing would let the matter rest there?” he asked. “This is what comes of the entirely silly idea of Australia tearing an arm off a major Asian power.”

None of the criticisms of the White Paper—from Dibb, White, or Keating—involved any objection to the massive military buildup over the next two decades outlined in the document. That this aspect of the Rudd government’s agenda enjoys unanimous support demonstrates that, despite increasingly sharp tactical differences, every wing of the ruling elite agrees on militarism and war to secure Australian imperialism’s interests throughout the Asia-Pacific region.



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